

CBS News App | Gift Guide 2021 | CBSN Live Stream | CBS Newsletters | CBS News Full Episodes | COVID Pandemic | CBS Village

☰ CBS NEWS

🔍 Login

What is the QAnon conspiracy theory?

BY WILL RAHN, DAN PATTERSON
UPDATED ON: MARCH 29, 2021 / 3:36 PM / CBS NEWS



What started as a fringe movement among former President Trump's supporters, confined to the shadier corners of the internet, has taken a mainstream turn. The QAnon conspiracy theory started on 4chan, the online bulletin board known for creating and spreading memes, then migrated and spread on larger social media platforms. Facebook has taken several thousand QAnon-linked accounts in 2020 and



Be the first to know

Get browser notifications for breaking news, live events, and exclusive reporting.

Not Now

Turn On

The FBI has warned that fringe conspiracy theories like QAnon pose a growing domestic terrorism threat.

What is the QAnon conspiracy theory? What do its followers believe? Those questions have become more difficult to answer as the movement has expanded since its inception in 2017.

The story of Q

QAnon purports that America is run by a cabal of pedophiles and Satan-worshippers who run a global child sex-trafficking operation and that former President Trump is the only person who can stop them. The information supposedly comes from a high-ranking government official who posts cryptic clues on 4chan and the even more unfettered site 8chan under the name "Q."



Be the first to know

Get browser notifications for breaking news, live events, and exclusive reporting.

Not Now

Turn On

2018, in Tampa, Fla.

free of interpretation, which is necessary because Q's
Anon believers help fill in the gaps and create a

storyline that's more or less comprehensible.

QAnon exists as a kind of parallel history, in which a "deep state" took over decades ago. An all-encompassing theory of the world, it appears to tie together and explain everything from "Pizzagate" to ISIS to the prevalence of mass shootings and the JFK assassination.

It claims the military, supposedly eager to see the deep state overthrown, recruited Donald Trump to run for the president. But the deep state, which controls the media, quickly tried to smear him through "fake news" and unfounded allegations of collusion with Russia. It goes on to insist that despite the deep state's best efforts, however, Mr. Trump is

winning, and that Q is releasing sanctioned leaks to the public in order to galvanize them ahead of "The Storm," which is the moment when the deep state's leaders are arrested and sent to Guantanamo Bay. QAnon believers have called this process "The Great Awakening."

Enter "the storm"

The storm takes its name from then-President Trump's enigmatic comment from October 2018 about "the calm before the storm." Q began posting soon after and said that the storm Mr. Trump referenced is a coming series of mass arrests that would end the deep state forever.

In QAnon lore, President Trump was secretly working with special counsel Robert Mueller to bring the deep state down, and the storm is a kind of Judgment Day in which the evildoers are punished and the faithful are redeemed. Q has repeatedly suggested that the storm would hit in the very near future and has even said certain people would be arrested at certain dates.

When those dates come and go without any arrests, Q says that they needed to be delayed for one reason or another, but that Mr. Trump still has the situation well in hand.

Bakers and breadcrumbs

Q's posts tended to be either vague or totally incomprehensible, but QAnon believers have been more than happy to try and decipher them. At one point in 2019, for example, Q posted a photo of an unnamed island chain. Eager to divine the reasoning behind the post, QAnon adherents tried to "prove" that the photo must have been taken on Air Force One and thus that Q was traveling with the president.

The Q posts are known to the faithful as "breadcrumbs." The people who then try to figure out what they mean are called "bakers." According to [The Daily Beast's Will Sommer](#), QAnon believers also spend a lot of time trying to figure out who in the government is a "white hat" Trump supporter and who is a "black hat" in league with the deep state. Their rallying cry is "where we go one, we go all," a line from the 1996 Jeff Bridges sailing adventure "White Squall" that they misattribute to President Kennedy.

The phrase is frequently abbreviated to "WWGIWGA," which Roseanne Barr – one of several celebrity QAnon supporters – tweeted in June 2018. Former Red Sox pitcher and current right-wing radio host Curt Schilling has also promoted QAnon online.



Be the first to know

Get browser notifications for breaking news, live events, and exclusive reporting.

Not Now

Turn On

(anne) [June 20, 2018](#)

Q's identity

The name refers to Q-level clearance at the Energy Department. But who's behind the posts is anybody's guess. According to Sommer, the QAnon faithful sometimes point to former national security adviser Michael Flynn and White House aide Dan Scavino as possibilities. Others believe it's Mr. Trump himself. [Another theory](#) is that John F. Kennedy Jr.

faked his death and now posts on 8chan as QAnon.

On November 3, Election Day, 8chan (now 8kun) administrator Ron Watkins resigned from that role. Q did not post for the next week, raising suspicions about a possible connection.

QAnon on social media

QAnon spread from its fringe beginnings on 4chan and 8chan to larger social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube. These platforms have faced increasing pressure to crack down on these accounts and groups, but have found it difficult to do so.

"QAnon is not one organization that you can just cancel or remove," says CBS News technology reporter Dan Patterson.

"For a long time they did little" to moderate QAnon activity, says Patterson. Only starting in the summer and fall of 2020 have the larger platforms – [Facebook](#), [Twitter](#), and [YouTube](#) – taken stronger action, removing groups and [banning accounts](#).

Still, Patterson says, these platforms provide little information beyond numbers of accounts affected. "These organizations are heavily driven by algorithms, and these algorithms really favor engagement, which QAnon is really good at doing."

Evolution of QAnon

As the QAnon movement migrated to more mainstream social media platforms, it developed new conspiracy theories that have helped subsume more followers.

Many QAnon supporters believe that President Kennedy was set to reveal the existence of the secret government when he was assassinated. They also believe President Reagan was shot on the deep state's orders, and that all the presidents since he left office – with the exception of President Trump – have been deep state agents.

QAnon believers have also latched onto other conspiracies, such as the 9/11 "[truther](#)" [movement](#) and anti-Semitic claims about ownership of the world's banks. Different QAnon followers identify with different conspiracies, though they all latch onto the central conspiracy of child sex trafficking rings perpetrated by members of the Democratic party.

Followers also started staging "Save Our Children" demonstrations, which attracted more attention and potential support. According to the Associated Press, the trend [#SaveTheChildren](#) was mentioned more than 800,000 times on Twitter in August 2020. The group [organized](#) a number of "Save the Children" rallies ahead of the 2020 election.

"It seems like they've hijacked the 'Save Our Children' movement, infiltrating it and putting their spin on it," says [Daryl Johnson](#), who previously researched right-wing terrorism for the Department of Homeland Security. "Think about children and how vulnerable they are. The issue really tugs at the hearts of anybody. But they're linking it to their



Be the first to know

Get browser notifications for breaking news, live events, and exclusive reporting.

Not Now

Turn On

[conspiracy theories](#), "The beliefs themselves are worse you can say about your political competitors than

"It has a lot of properties that make it more like a cult," Uscinski said.

QAnon supporters used similar trends in [Peloton communities](#), [Instagram comments](#), and with [yoga and wellness groups](#).

Dapper Gander, a site that tracks QAnon and other conspiracies, writes that sanitized trends like "Save the Children" are a recruitment tactic designed to hook and convert a mainstream audience – a "sales funnel" to draw people in.

Fredrick Brennan, founder of 8chan who split from the site and became a prominent critic of QAnon, expects that the conspiracy will continue to evolve using similar tactics.

"These [QAnon] influencers are extremely conniving people and they will be able to come up with new narratives that keep a large number of people focused," he said.

QAnon in Congress

At least 19 House Republican candidates who support or have elevated the QAnon movement were on the November ballot, according to tracking by Media Matters. Two QAnon supporters were elected to the United States House of Representatives:

- Marjorie Taylor Greene won her race in Georgia's 14th congressional district.
- Lauren Boebert won her race in Colorado's 3rd congressional district.

There is no QAnon?

QAnon influencers recently started using the phrase "There is no QAnon," insisting that the conspiracy was invented by the media.

The trend began on October 17, 2020 when the infamous user "Q" updated the message board 8kun with a post that read:

"There is 'Q.' 1

There are 'Anons.' 2

There is no 'QANON.' 3

Media labeling as 'QANON' is a method [deliberate] to combine [attach] 'Q' to comments _theories _suggestions _statements [and ACTIONS] made by 2.: is pretty self-explanatory."

The ploy is an attempt to gaslight the public into believing that QAnon was invented by the media and that its supporters are nonviolent peaceful patriots, author and conspiracy expert Mike Rothschild explained.

"True believers are rewriting its history, pretending 'QAnon' is a term made up by the media to smear truth-seekers and researchers," Rothschild said. "In reality, Q believers were using the term since the days after the first Q drops. Q used it in dozens of posts, and it's all over their merchandise and iconography. Pretending they never used it is a form of



Be the first to know

Get browser notifications for breaking news, live events, and exclusive reporting.

Not Now

Turn On

used the phrase on social media. Although Twitter in March 2021, several accounts continue to tweet "There

QAnon, violence, and the January 6th Capitol riot

When Jacob Chansley, the so-called "QAnon shaman," planted a spear-tipped flag in the U.S. Capitol during the January 6th insurrection his intent was to "capture and assassinate" elected officials, according to U.S. prosecutors. In an

interview with 60 Minutes+, Chansley denied that, saying his actions "were not an attack on this country."

The FBI has arrested well over 300 people so far in connection with the insurrection, dozens of whom belonged to the QAnon conspiracy group.

The riot exposed the violent nature of QAnon. Fermented by disinformation on obscure message boards and amplified by social media, some QAnon adherents were linked to violence incidents and had been agitating for a military takeover of the U.S. government for years prior to the insurrection.

The potential for danger was evident in "Pizzagate," an anti-Hillary Clinton conspiracy that predated and partly inspired QAnon. It falsely claimed a child abuse ring operated of the (nonexistent) basement of a Washington, D.C. restaurant, and a man who showed up there and fired an assault rifle was sentenced to 4 years in prison in 2017. In 2018 a QAnon member armed with a number of military-style weapons parked an armored car on Hoover Dam. In early 2020 a QAnon believer armed with over a dozen knives drove to New York in an attempt to "take out" Joe Biden and Hillary Clinton.

QAnon members have repeatedly threatened to dox, harm or kill journalists covering the conspiracy.

QAnon often harass and threaten journalists.

TWITTER

"The group's true believers want us to believe they're peaceful patriots who love democracy, but this is laughable. They are using this language to soften their public image," said Rothschild. "Violence is inherent to the QAnon belief structure, which includes authoritarian rule by Donald Trump enforced by the military which will subsequently arrest and execute his political enemies.

QAnon casualties

When "Q's" predictions failed to materialize – Donald Trump was not sworn in for a second term, and there were no mass arrests of Satan-worshipping child abusers in an event called "The Storm" – true believers were stunned.



Be the first to know

Get browser notifications for breaking news, live events, and exclusive reporting.

Not Now

Turn On

native social networks like Parler, and messaging apps didit support group called "QAnon Casualties" where advice for those who want to leave the conspiracy.

But for some families, the damage was done.

One woman, who chose not to share her name publicly because she fears reprisals from the group, told CBS News that her family was irreparably harmed when her daughter, a QAnon supporter, cut off communication with family members who did not vote for Donald Trump.

"My [granddaughter] called me, she's all of 5, and asked what mommy hates me and why they can't talk to me anymore," she said in an email. "Before I could respond, my daughter found her with the phone and yelled at her that I'm a bad and dangerous person and that she needed to protect them from me. Then g'daughter yelled over the phone that she loves her mommy and hates me. Then the phone went dead."

Trending News

Biden to offer half a billion at-home COVID tests as Omicron surges

Bidens welcome new dog named Commander

Pentagon says about 100 service members engaged in extremist activity in 2021

U.S. to close border wall gaps and clean up Trump-era work sites



Be the first to know

Get browser notifications for breaking news, live events, and exclusive reporting.

Not Now

Turn On

or CBS News Digital.

First published on August 2, 2018 / 6:00 AM

© 2018 CBS Interactive Inc. All Rights Reserved.



Copyright © 2021 CBS Interactive Inc. All rights reserved.

[Privacy Policy](#)

[Do Not Sell My Personal Information](#)

[Cookies Policy](#)

[Terms of Use](#)

[About](#)

[Advertise](#)

[Closed Captioning](#)

[CBSN on Paramount+](#)

[CBS News Store](#)

[Site Map](#)

[Contact Us](#)

[Help](#)